

# Saudi Arabia

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## Freedom of the Press

The media environment in Saudi Arabia remained extremely restricted in 2013. Article 39 of the Basic Law of 1992 does not guarantee freedom of the press, and certain provisions of the law allow authorities to exercise broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition. It also prohibits publishing materials that harm national security or that “detract from a man’s dignity.” The 2003 Press and Publications Act governs the establishment of media outlets and stipulates penalties for press violations, such as fines and imprisonment. Under Royal Decree 1700/Mim Ba, issued in March 2005, jurisdiction over the media was transferred from the court system to the Ministry of Culture and Information, which is authorized to shut down any media outlet that it finds to have violated the press law. In April 2011, as uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa gained momentum, the monarchy issued a decree banning the reporting of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic law), undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders. The decree also amended several articles of the 2003 press law, allowing authorities to impose lifetime professional bans on journalists and levy fines of up to \$133,000 for violations of the law. Other amendments barred publication of anything harmful to the state or the coverage of trials without first obtaining permission from judicial authorities. An antiterrorism bill proposed in July 2011 included a minimum 10-year prison sentence for “questioning the integrity” of the king or crown prince, but had not yet been passed by the end of 2013.

Defamation is a criminal offense. Furthermore, any form of expression that insults or blasphemes Islam is punishable by death, as is the crime of apostasy. In February 2012, 23-year-old Saudi journalist and blogger Hamza Kashgari was deported to Saudi Arabia from Malaysia to face trial and a potential death sentence over microblog posts that allegedly insulted the prophet Muhammad. Kashgari was released from prison in October 2013 after more than a year and a half behind bars. No formal charges were filed against him.

Saudi Arabia has no freedom of information law that provides for public access to state-held information, and does not disclose details related to sensitive topics such as government spending and allocations to the royal family. The media have been allowed to observe and report upon the functions of some state entities, such as the Shura council, but access may be arbitrarily withdrawn and is not guaranteed by law.

Journalists are regularly arrested and sentenced to prison terms for contravening these laws. In April 2012, human rights activist and journalist Mikhilif bin Daham al-Shammari was banned from leaving the country for 10 years after publishing an article that criticized what he asserted was prejudice by Sunni Muslim religious scholars against members of the Shiite minority and their beliefs. In June 2013, al-Shammari was convicted of charges including sowing discord, harming public order and the image of the state, violating information technology laws, questioning the integrity of state officials and defaming various religious leaders. In addition to 5 years in prison and a 10-year travel ban, the judge also prohibited him from writing in both the press and on social media networks, as well as appearing on television or the radio. At year’s end, al-Shammari remained free pending appeal of his case. In July 2013, blogger and website owner Raef Badawi received a sentence of 7 years in prison and 600 lashes for violating the Saudi Cybercrime Law of 2007. While the law contains several legitimate provisions related to malicious activities such as hacking and fraud, it also contains prohibitions on activities that undermine vague concepts such as “religious values” and “public morals,” impinging upon free expression. Badawi founded the website Saudi Liberals, a progressive site that has been blocked by the government since its founding in 2008. The site

was accused of insulting religion and religious officials, including the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. In December 2013, during Badawi's appeal process, a lower court judge referred the case to the General Court and recommended that Badawi be tried for apostasy, a crime that carries the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. In October 2013, journalist Tariq al-Mubarak was arrested after writing a column in London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper in support of a campaign to allow women to drive in the kingdom. He was released after eight days.

According to the official media policy, the press should be a tool to educate the masses, propagate government views, and promote national unity. The government has been known to directly censor both local and international media, and journalists routinely practice self-censorship and avoid criticism of the royal family, Islam, or religious authorities.

Many Saudis have turned to the internet to express political opinions and expose government corruption. However, the government is able to monitor and block websites with relative ease, since all internet traffic is routed through proxy servers located in the state-run King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology. The government aggressively blocks websites it considers "immoral," the majority of which are pornographic, as well as sites deemed critical of the government by the Interior Ministry. Other politically sensitive websites are routinely blocked, including those associated with the country's disadvantaged Shiite Muslim minority. Protests in Shiite areas are ignored by the local press unless the Ministry of Information releases an official statement. Several websites sympathetic to Shiites were shut down in February 2012. Habib Ali al-Maatiq and Hussein Malik al-Salam were arrested and held without charge after the news website they managed, *Al-Fajr Cultural Network*, covered protests by demonstrators calling for reform in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province. The website was shut down by the authorities and the trial of al-Maatiq and al-Salam was still pending at the end of 2013. *Al-Awamia*, another news site that provided coverage of demonstrations in Eastern Province, was similarly shut down, and its editor, Jalal Mohamed al-Jamal, was arrested. Al-Jamal was released from prison in March 2013 after spending over a year in prison without charge. Also in February 2012, Saudi Arabia blocked the official website of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The government routinely censors online expression that it views as blasphemous. In September 2012, following region-wide protests against the anti-Islam film *The Innocence of Muslims*, the U.S.-based video-sharing site YouTube granted a request by the Saudi government to block access to the film in the kingdom.

There were relatively few cases of physical harassment of journalists in 2013. However, reporters frequently face difficulty covering the news, especially when trying to access Eastern Province, where protests and arrests are frequent and no local or foreign journalists are allowed to enter.

More than a dozen daily newspapers publish in Saudi Arabia. All are privately owned but controlled by individuals affiliated with the royal family. Members of the royal family also control two popular London-based dailies, *Asharq al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*, that serve a wider Arab audience. Broadcast media are controlled by the government, which owns and operates all terrestrial television and radio stations. Since 2011, the government has required all online newspapers and bloggers to obtain a special license from the Ministry of Culture and Information. Although satellite dishes are illegal, satellite television has become widespread and is an important source of foreign news. However, key regional satellite channels, including the popular Al-Arabiya news channel, are controlled by Saudi investors and adhere to local media norms.

Internet penetration in Saudi Arabia reached nearly 61 percent in 2013. The country was ranked first globally in the proportion of mobile telephone users, with a phone-to-population ratio of 188 percent, according to a report by the UN Conference on Trade and Development. Saudi Arabia also ranked first in the total number of daily YouTube views, according to Google, the site's owner.

## 2014 Scores

## **Press Status**

Not Free

## **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

83

## **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

29

## **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

29

## **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

25